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Report of the Secretary-General on the United Nations Interim Force in Lebanon

(for the period from 21 July 2004 to 20 January 2005)

I. Introduction

1. The present report is submitted pursuant to Security Council resolution 1553 (2004) of 29 July 2004, by which the Council extended the mandate of the United Nations Interim Force in Lebanon (UNIFIL) for a further period of six months, until 31 January 2005. It covers developments since the issuance of my previous report, dated 21 July 2004 (S/2004/572).

II. Situation in the area of operation

2. During the reporting period, a relatively quiet but tense situation prevailed in the UNIFIL area of operation. Until this month, there had been a notable absence of armed exchanges between Hizbollah and the Israel Defense Forces (IDF), including in the Shab'a farms area. This quiet was decisively shattered, however, by a Hizbollah roadside bomb attack on an IDF convoy in the Shab'a farms area on 9 January, which killed an IDF soldier and wounded three others. The ensuing military reaction by IDF resulted in the death of a United Nations military observer and the injury of another.

3. Over the past six months there have also been two serious violations of the Blue Line involving rocket fire by unidentified, presumably Palestinian, armed elements operating from southern Lebanon, but no casualties resulted. Israeli air incursions into Lebanese airspace continued throughout the reporting period with little change and, in a new development, on one occasion Hizbollah launched a remotely piloted aerial vehicle, or drone, that penetrated Israeli airspace. There were, however, no instances of Hizbollah anti-aircraft fire across the line.

4. The grave incident that took place on 9 January occurred when a Hizbollah roadside explosive device was detonated as an IDF convoy was passing on patrol one kilometre south of the Blue Line in the Shab'a farms area. The first vehicle in the convoy was hit and an IDF soldier was killed and three others wounded. Several minutes later, two United Nations military observers and one Lebanese interpreter from Observer Group Lebanon, on patrol north of the Blue Line in the same

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vicinity, came under IDF tank and machine gun fire. One United Nations observer, a French national, was killed and another, a Swedish national, was injured. The observers were on foot and wearing the United Nations insignia and blue berets.

5. IDF retaliation for the Hizbollah attack continued with artillery and small-arms fire directed at a Hizbollah position in the vicinity of Hula, followed by artillery shelling south of Kafr Shuba. Another artillery shell and four anti-tank rounds were fired by IDF towards Fatima gate, near Metulla, and a total of 14 aerial bombs were dropped near Kafr Kila, Ghajar and Shab'a. Hizbollah claimed one fighter killed and one wounded. In taking responsibility for the attack on the IDF convoy, Hizbollah said it was continuing its fight "to liberate" the Shab'a farms.

6. Following those events, on 17 January another Hizbollah roadside bomb exploded on the Israeli side of the Blue Line and damaged an IDF demining vehicle sent to clear any remaining explosive devices in the same area of the Shab'a farms. There were no casualties. IDF immediately launched a series of artillery shells into Lebanon around Kafr Shuba and dropped five aerial bombs on suspected Hizbollah positions near Al Hinniya and in the general area of Frum. Two Lebanese civilians were wounded.

7. My Personal Representative for Southern Lebanon and I condemned the military escalation and emphasized the need for restraint. I also underscored the obligation of both sides to ensure the safety and security of United Nations personnel in the area.

8. Earlier in the reporting period, perpetrators yet to be apprehended though generally believed to be Palestinian militants fired rockets on three separate occasions. On 9 October one rocket was fired from near Yarun in the general direction of Israel. The rocket malfunctioned and landed on the Lebanese side of the Blue Line. On 28 October a rocket was fired from the general area of Alma Ash Shab, which did cross the line. It landed in Israeli territory in an open field in the vicinity of Shlomi. On 15 November another rocket fired from Lebanon crossed the line and again landed near Shlomi.

9. There were no casualties or property damage reported as a result of those rocket-firing incidents. UNIFIL was able to quickly establish contact with IDF and Lebanese army authorities to aid in clarifying the situation and in reducing tensions that could well have led to escalation. IDF acted with restraint and did not respond militarily to any of the attacks. The Lebanese authorities took a public position against such attacks and pledged to take steps to prevent them.

10. Israeli air incursions into Lebanon continued throughout the reporting period. Such violations of the line occurred sporadically, but sometimes they involved a considerable number of aircraft. Israeli officials maintained the position that there would be overflights whenever they deemed them necessary. As in the past, the aircraft often penetrated deep into Lebanon, generating sonic booms over populated areas. The pattern identified in my previous reports continued, whereby some aircraft would fly out to sea and enter Lebanese airspace north of the UNIFIL area of operation, thus avoiding direct observation and verification by UNIFIL.

11. There were no instances of Hizbollah anti-aircraft fire across the Blue Line. However, on 7 November a drone launched from Lebanon crossed into Israel and flew over the town of Shlomi before re-entering southern Lebanon. The drone then fell into the sea near Naqoura. Hizbollah announced that it had operated the drone in

response to Israeli violations of Lebanese airspace and claimed that it would do so again as circumstances warranted.

12. My senior representatives in the region and I, as well as concerned Member States, called repeatedly upon the Governments of Israel and Lebanon to cease violations of the Blue Line and to refrain from actions that carried significant potential for escalation. We also continued to remind the parties that one violation did not justify another.

13. UNIFIL recorded a number of minor ground violations of the line, primarily by Lebanese shepherds and the rare hunter in the Shab'a farms and Ghajar areas. The violations involving the shepherds became an almost daily routine. The risk that they could lead to more serious incidents was demonstrated when, on several occasions, IDF fired shots in the air to warn the shepherds away. On one occasion, after two Lebanese civilians had reportedly attempted to damage the technical fence, IDF fired shots that hit their vehicle. There were also a few instances of IDF firing small and medium-sized arms and illumination rounds across the line, particularly at night in the Shab'a farms area.

14. In separate occurrences, five Lebanese nationals were apprehended by IDF after having crossed the Blue Line. Following brief interrogations, IDF turned each over to UNIFIL, which in turn handed them over to the Lebanese authorities.

15. Demonstrators on the Lebanese side of the Blue Line gathered periodically at the points of friction identified in my previous reports, Sheikh Abbad Hill east of Hula and Fatima gate west of Metulla, as well as several times at the north gate at Kafr Kila. The protestors, generally in small groups, irregularly threw stones and other objects at IDF positions.

16. The Lebanese Joint Security Force and the Lebanese Army continued to operate in the areas vacated by Israel four years ago. The strength and activity of the Joint Security Force generally remained the same, apart from an increase in operations and a more visible presence in the aftermath of the firing incidents described above. The Government of Lebanon continued to maintain the position that, so long as there was no comprehensive peace with Israel, Lebanese armed forces would not be deployed along the line of withdrawal.

17. Under those circumstances, Hizbollah maintained its visible presence near the Blue Line through a network of mobile checkpoints, fixed positions and patrols. Hizbollah established several new positions and observation points. On the whole, Hizbollah refrained from interfering with the mission's freedom of movement. Occasional temporary denials of access to UNIFIL patrols were quickly rectified and have declined overall.

18. UNIFIL provided assistance to the Lebanese civilian population in the form of medical care, water projects, equipment or services for schools and orphanages and supplied social services to the needy. UNIFIL assistance was provided from resources made available primarily by troop-contributing countries. UNIFIL cooperated closely on humanitarian matters with the Lebanese authorities, United Nations agencies, in particular the Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia and the United Nations Children's Fund, the International Committee of the Red Cross and other organizations and agencies operating in Lebanon.

19. The presence of a large number of minefields in the UNIFIL area of operation, which are now largely concentrated along the Blue Line owing to comprehensive demining in other sectors, remained a matter of serious concern. Since July one Lebanese civilian has been killed and one injured as a result of exploding mines. UNIFIL continued its operational demining activities, demolishing more than 100 mines and pieces of unexploded ordnance and clearing nearly 20,000 square metres of land. UNIFIL also regularly provided mine-risk education to local schoolchildren.

20. As a direct result of the success of the ongoing demining efforts in southern Lebanon, many of the previously landmine-afflicted areas are now cultivated or planted or otherwise benefit from increased access and development opportunities. While more remains to be done, the bulk of the landmines posing a direct humanitarian threat south of the Litani River have been cleared. The notable exception is the area adjacent to the Blue Line, where political and military obstacles to demining have impeded progress.

21. My Personal Representative continued to work in close collaboration with the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) and other United Nations agencies in advocating for socio-economic needs and facilitating the funding and implementation of development projects in the south. UNDP continued to lead the efforts of the United Nations system in working with the Lebanese authorities for the development and rehabilitation of the south.

III. Organizational matters

22. UNIFIL operations were concentrated along the Blue Line. The Force remained focused on maintaining the ceasefire through ground and air patrols of its area of operation, observation from fixed positions and close contact with the parties, the latter with a view to correcting violations, resolving incidents and preventing escalation. The United Nations Truce Supervision Organization (UNTSO), through Observer Group Lebanon, supported UNIFIL in the fulfilment of its mandate.

23. As at 31 December 2004, UNIFIL comprised 2,001 troops, from France (204), Ghana (652), India (650), Ireland (5), Italy (54), Poland (238) and Ukraine (198). UNIFIL was assisted in its tasks by 51 military observers of UNTSO. A map showing the current deployment of UNIFIL is attached. In addition, UNIFIL employed 407 civilian staff, of whom 104 had been recruited internationally and 303 locally. Major General Alain Pellegrini continued as Force Commander. Staffan de Mistura continued to act as my Personal Representative for Southern Lebanon.

24. I regret to report the death of one member of UNIFIL, a Ghanaian soldier who was killed in a traffic accident, the death of a French member of Observer Group Lebanon and the wounding of a Swedish member of Observer Group Lebanon in the firing incident of 9 January. Since the establishment of UNIFIL, 246 members of the Force have lost their lives, 79 as a result of firing or bomb explosions, 105 as a result of accidents and 62 from other causes. Firing or mine explosions wounded a total of 345.

IV. Financial aspects

25. By its resolution 58/307 of 18 June 2004, the General Assembly appropriated to the Special Account for UNIFIL the amount of $93 million gross, equivalent to a monthly rate of $7.7 million, for the maintenance of the Force for the period from 1 July 2004 to 30 June 2005. Should the Security Council decide to extend the mandate of UNIFIL beyond 31 January 2005, as recommended in paragraph 36 below, the cost of its maintenance would be limited to the amounts approved by the Assembly.

26. As at 30 November 2004, unpaid assessments to the special account for UNIFIL for the period since its inception amounted to $47.1 million. The total outstanding assessed contributions for all peacekeeping operations at that date amounted to $2,299.3 million.

V. Observations

27. Over the past six months, the Blue Line has enjoyed a prolonged period of relative quiet. I had hoped that this situation would present an opportunity for achieving progress towards the objective of bringing international peace and security to southern Lebanon. But as has been demonstrated more than once over the past four years and unfortunately again this month, significant periods of quiet along the Blue Line are often followed by several episodes of hostilities. Furthermore, while violent incidents were considerably fewer than during the previous reporting period, tensions between the parties did not at any point appreciably diminish. Hostile rhetoric remained the norm and stability continued to be threatened, most dramatically by the incidents of 9 and 17 January, but also by rogue acts and, for the first time, air incursions from both sides.

28. The resumption of military measures, for which Hizbollah took credit, asserting its claimed prerogative to resist Israeli occupation of Lebanese territory by force, was disturbing. The United Nations has made abundantly clear that no violations of the Blue Line are acceptable. The continually asserted position of the Government of Lebanon that the Blue Line is not valid in the Shab'a farms area is not compatible with Security Council resolutions. The Council has recognized the Blue Line as valid for purposes of confirming Israel's withdrawal pursuant to resolution 425 (1978). The Government of Lebanon should heed the Council's repeated calls for the parties to respect the Blue Line in its entirety.

29. I was greatly troubled by the disregard shown for the safety and security of the unarmed United Nations military observers evidenced by the actions of IDF on 9 January. UNIFIL established without a doubt that the observers were wearing the United Nations insignia and their blue berets. While military necessity may demand prompt action in the face of an attack, the parties, in living up to their obligation to ensure the safety and security of United Nations personnel, should make every reasonable effort to be certain that United Nations personnel are not targeted.

30. The air violations continued to be a matter of significant concern. As long as Israel carries on with its policy of overflying Lebanon whenever it sees fit to do so, it risks provoking retaliatory acts from the Lebanese side. In addition, the periodic sonic booms generated over population centres only generate animosity in the local populace. While the lack of instances of anti-aircraft fire across the line during the

reporting period must be noted and welcomed, Hizbollah's launch of a drone into Israel was a regrettable development, an activity sure to raise tensions and to increase the prospects for military confrontation. I wish to remind all parties of the consistent position of the United Nations that there should be no air violations, a position that applies on both sides of the Blue Line.

31. The rocket-firing incidents perpetrated by individuals allegedly affiliated with Palestinian militant factions demonstrated the volatility of the sector. Importantly, none of the incidents resulted in a military escalation, and for this the parties and UNIFIL deserve credit. Nevertheless, this type of incident poses a great risk to stability in the area. The Government of Lebanon continued to exercise the capacity it has demonstrated thus far to exert its security authority through various activities of the Joint Security Force, including prompt responses to specific incidents. More needs to be done, however, to meet the Security Council's call for extended measures to ensure the return of effective governmental authority throughout the south, including through the deployment of additional Lebanese armed forces. Once again, I urge the Government to do its utmost to ensure calm and to exert full control over the use of force across its entire territory.

32. In both private and public forums, Israel and Lebanon have declared their desire to avoid confrontation. At times their actions have clearly supported those intentions. I encourage the parties to live up to those stated aspirations and to do their utmost to adhere to a course favouring peace and security. To that end, I reiterate the call upon all the parties to abide by their obligations under the relevant Security Council resolutions, to fully respect the withdrawal line in its entirety and to exercise utmost restraint.

33. Economic development of the south remains a pressing need and is inextricably linked to peace and security. I urge the Government of Lebanon, international donors, United Nations agencies and non-governmental organizations to bolster their efforts towards the continued economic rehabilitation and development of the south.

34. UNIFIL will continue to contribute to the restoration of international peace and security by observing, monitoring and reporting on developments in its area of operation and liaising with the parties to maintain calm. My Personal Representative will continue, in close consultation with other senior United Nations officials, to lend the political and diplomatic support of the United Nations to the parties to establish lasting peace and security in southern Lebanon.

35. The situation along the Blue Line continues to be susceptible to volatile regional developments. This again underscores the need to achieve a comprehensive, just and lasting peace in the Middle East, based on all the relevant resolutions of the Security Council, including resolutions 242 (1967), 338 (1973), 1397 (2002) and 1515 (2003).

36. In a letter dated 10 January 2005 (S/2005/13), the Permanent Representative of Lebanon to the United Nations conveyed to me his Government's request that the Security Council extend the mandate of UNIFIL for an additional period of six months. In the light of conditions prevailing in the area, I recommend that the Security Council extend the mandate of UNIFIL until 31 July 2005.

37. I must again draw attention to the unpaid assessments for the funding of the Force, which amount to $47.1 million. Eventually this represents money owed to the

Member States contributing the troops that make up the Force. I appeal to all Member States to pay their assessments promptly and in full and to clear all remaining arrears. I should like to express my gratitude to the Governments contributing troops to the Force for their understanding and patience.

38. In conclusion, I wish to express my appreciation to Mr. de Mistura, my Personal Representative, and to pay tribute to Major General Pellegrini and the men and women of UNIFIL for the manner in which they have carried out their tasks. Their discipline and bearing have been of a high order, reflecting credit on themselves and the United Nations.

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